

"Un mundo enfermo?" Manuel Zeno Gandía's *La charca* and National Puerto Rican Discourse

Wolfgang Binder (Erlangen)

In his book, *The Spanish American Regional Novel* (1990) Carlos J. Alonso postulates that "the preoccupation with cultural autochthony has operated as an enabling rhetorical formula that has generated cultural discourse in Latin America through its iterative use." (p. 16)

Much of Puerto Rican literature up to the very last years has been shaped by the national traumas: the invasion of the island by the United States of America, broken promises and lost hopes, the enfeebling of the creole elites, the virtual disappearance of agricultural production, i.e. the use of the land by its inhabitants, the limbo of a colonial situation only somewhat alleviated by the construction of the *Estado Libre Asociado* *Muñozista*, a model which barely won by a little over two percent in the vote of November 1993. The void of a non-existent nation state, of independence (as illusionary as this may be, given the hard facts of geography and power in the Western hemisphere), has fueled the literary and scholarly production with an understandably persistent intensity.

Manuel Zeno Gandía was born in 1855 in Arecibo the son of a conservative sugar *hacendado* who opposed the abolition of slavery, which came late enough for Puerto Rico – on February 11th, 1873. Zeno, who died in 1930, a few months before an ill-fated man called Pedro Albizu Campos was elected President of the *Partido Nacionalista*, is indisputably one of the outstanding figures of the Puerto Rican literary canon. In fact, to a considerable degree he, or rather literary critics, can be held responsible for establishing that essentially paternalist canon to this day. (See Gelpí, pp. 6 ff.) In the early 1880s, naturalism as a method, and the work of Emile Zola were being discussed in Puerto Rico. In his preface to Carmela Eulate Sanjurjo's little known novel *La muñeca* (1895), Zeno Gandía wrote:

"Siempre me atrajo esa admirable facultad que permite al artista hacer realidad. En mis gustos, avanzo todavía un poco más: creo el naturalismo lo único formal, útil y positivamente artístico. [...] hay que analizar las tempestades del alma dentro de la moral y la filosofía y las artes con el naturalismo. Que no se vuelva la cara horrorizada ante la realidad, porque donde quiera que se vuelva se la encuentra y porque si los átomos

cristalizan a veces en diamante y en oro, las almas se funden también en la verdad, las virtudes y el bien.[...]" (p. 18 f.)

Zeno Gandía's novel *La charca*, his first of a cycle of four – out of eleven that he planned to write – which he called "Crónicas de un mundo enfermo", is generally considered his most successful. It was published in 1894, four years before the North American takeover. He finished his "crónicas" with *Redentores* that got published in installments in the newspaper *El Imparcial* in 1925, which may account for the episodic character of much of the text. It was preceded by *El negocio* (1922) and *El negocio* in turn with a surprisingly long interval by *Garduña* (1896), which had in fact been finished as early as 1890. The two groups of novels are divided by extra-literary sociopolitical facts, a surprisingly long military government given the peaceful surrender and trustful attitude of the Puerto Rican masses, by bitter disappointments of political and economic hopes of the members of the elites to which belonged the medical doctor, politician, journalist, and writer Zeno Gandía. His discourse consequently shifted from a diagnosis couched in dramatic but also in poetic wordings and stratagems in his second group to one of a more clearly political, ideological dimension. In addition, his focus shifts, in the twenties, from a rural world to an urban setting, to a territory where the power structure had moved to. In studying much of what concerns Puerto Rico, one has to be aware of the fact that Puerto Rico was a rather neglected outpost of the Spanish Empire, an island whose history is marked by a continuum of not so obscure desires, i.e. serving as a place of strategic relevance to major powers.

Let me recall that Captain A. T. Mahan from the United States Navy, a man who influenced North American strategic and thus economic thinking in the 1890s and way beyond, wrote eight years before the Spanish Empire crumbled in the Caribbean:

"Colonies attached to the mother country afford [...] the surest means of supporting abroad the sea power of a country. In peace, the influence of the government should be felt in promoting by all means a warmth of attachment and a unity of interest which will make the welfare of one the welfare of all."

In war, Mahan sees colonies as apt "to provide resting-places for [our ships], where they can coal and repair [...]" (Mahan, p. 83)

North American governors from the start – and I could quote from Governor Charles Allen's *First Annual Report ... Covering the Period From May 1, 1900 to May 1, 1901* – saw Puerto Rico as a "resting-place", a tropical garden that should be tended to vigorously by the energetic Anglo-Saxon race which could bring civilization and morals to the natives, in addition to the English tongue, capital, and democracy. (Allen,

pp. 28 ff., 41) The combination of a divinely ordained "manifest destiny", strategic advantages, imminent enrichment and feelings of racial superiority were irresistible motives indeed for expansionism and colonization.

To give just one example of the malcontentment of Puerto Rican leaders after two years of North American military rule, I will quote from José Julio Henna's speech at one of the Washington hearings (one of the recurring patterns of Puerto Rican - United States relations). Henna, it should be added, had formerly been a separatist when it came to Spain and was now, before the imminent passing of the Foraker Act, an assimilationist of the Puerto Rican Partido Republicano. I quote from the Congressional Records:

"We must not forget how the American army was received. The houses were opened to them; the people said: 'We are glad to have you here, you are our redeemers. [*sic!*] But instead, [...] the occupation has been a perfect failure. We have suffered everything. No liberty, no rights, absolutely no protection, not even the right to travel. We can not travel today because we can not get passports. We are Mr. Nobody from Nowhere. We have no political status, no civil rights.'" (Henna, p. 116)

Zeno Gandía, a former leader of the Partido Autonomista Histórico, was, along with Henna and Eugenio María Hostos, one of the three commissioners in Washington and presented with Henna the case of Puerto Rico in a series of papers and adjunct letters, published in 1917 as *El Caso de Puerto Rico*. His initial admiration of President McKinley gives increasingly way to double-edged disappointment and bitterness, not only because the American side does not grant the necessary aid he expected, but also because he felt, in contrast to Hostos, let alone Betances, that his own people were unable to support themselves as an independent nation, alone or within a potential Antillean Confederation. In a letter written in 1901 to Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez, which was to be published only after his death in 1930 and which refers to his disagreements with Hostos, he states:

"Yo amo a mi patria y la quisiera independiente para su felicidad; conosco a mis compatriotas y los veo con tristeza incapaces para esa independencia. Conosco la realidad política de los Estados Unidos y creo en absoluto imposible un gobierno temporal para granjear después la independencia de este país." (In: Elena Zeno de Matos, p. 156)

In the same letter and in the same political context and possible paradigms for Puerto Rico's future we find medicinal metaphors that recur in *La charca* and which are part of Zeno Gandía's narrative registers in his diagnosis of Puerto Rican society:

"[...] del mismo modo que el alcoholismo no puede curarse cortando de pronto el tósigo alcohólico y dar metódicas dosis del veneno es necesario hasta disponer el organismo del enfermo a vivir sin la saturación mortífera, asimismo, en este desdichado cuerpo social no podrá una absoluta curación obtenerse si no se transige metódica y gradualmente con el enfermizo sistema, aparentando seguirle para arrancar al cabo de raíz la viciosa educación que satura nuestro pueblo." (In: Elena Zeno de Matos, p. 151)

In February of 1904, he and Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón founded the Union Party, which wins the elections, has the moderate Luis Muñoz Rivera (as opposed to the later more radical leader and poet José de Diego) as its President and half-heartedly holds up independence as one of its ideals. By the early twenties, Zeno Gandía had distanced himself from the volatile political parties, their coalitions, their fusions, the continuous *bochinche* in Puerto Rican political life (e.g. Unión and Partido Republicano were to merge in 1924).

I do not wish to enter into a discussion of how "naturalistic" *La charca* is; let it suffice to say that I am aware of the fact that there are several naturalisms, that the borders between what has been termed "realism" and "naturalism" are not rigid, that Zola's *Le roman expérimental* (1880) and Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* were known to Zeno, that Sanz del Río in Spain and krausismo had been instrumental in making French naturalism acceptable in Spain and thus in the Puerto Rico of the 1880s, that Zeno Gandía had read Benito Pérez Galdós' novel *Los desheredados* (1881) and Emilia Pardo Bazán's *La cuestión palpitante*. In much of Zeno Gandía's writing we do note "un autor culto." Amado Nervo's *Perlas negras* had appeared in 1895, and José Santos Chocano had visited Puerto Rico in 1895; during one of his stays in New York, Zeno had met and admired José Martí; he wrote about him in the paper *El Imparcial*, June 11, 1925. He was not only familiar with *modernismo*, he shared its musicality, lyricism, also its precocity to some degree.

La charca is *grosso modo* peopled by a constellation of three groups: by *jíbaros*, peasants living in the mountains, the *hacendados* Galante and Juan del Salto, the priest Padre Esteban, and the shopkeeper Andújar. Set apart from the mass of the *jíbaros* is Silvina, a fourteen-year-old girl, and her lover Ciro.

With the exception of Padre Esteban and del Salto, life in the mountains is characterized by isolation, misery, greed, violence, unbridled lust and sexual abuse. Very few ethical norms corresponding to a bourgeois morale exist: Leandra, Silvina's mother gave birth to nine children, seven stemmed from different fathers. Her lover occasionally forces Silvina into

sexual practice as well. The auctorial voice speaks of "la libre poligamia del bosque". (p. 4) Both Galante and Gaspar are painted as repugnant bullies, as useless providers. Images comparing them to wild animals abound; Gaspar's "cabezota innoble" reaches monstrous, ape-like dimensions (Alvarez, p. 69); features correspond to inner values or the lack of them, an age-old topos in literature. Zeno Gandía succeeded with the powerful, ruthless, profit-ridden landowner Galante in creating a memorable study of a case of "machismo" which manipulates female lives wherever (mainly) economic needs allow it to reign supreme.

With the well-intentioned Juan del Salto the author tries to balance and to complete his negative portrayal of the "hacendado" caste. Del Salto is a reformist, a meliorist, who reflects upon present surrounding conditions and who is at the same time part of them and distanced from them. He despairs of the *jíbaros'* apathy:

"sois indiferentes lo mismo para el bien que para el mal; sois apáticos, sois desver [...]." (p. 13)

His brooding reflections lead him to the conclusion that along with sound nutrition and hygiene, education, "escuelas", could be the key to progress, could lead to a refinement of unbridled passions, of alcoholism. If you consult the Puerto Rican historian and sociologist Salvador Brau, his chapter "La campesina" in *Disquisiciones sociológicas*, which precedes *La charca* by roughly a decade, you will read similar arguments. Juan del Salto wavers between highflown ideals and practical steps, a tension which makes him ineffective, a secular version of Padre Esteban. Both are mere "habladores". An interminable discussion about the deplorable state of the "jíbaros" – Padre Esteban calls them "pariahs", – and possible recipes for the malaise in chapter 9, a discussion, in which the doctor Pintado joins, ends with the following remark:

"Y Juan sumó mentalmente las partidas de café recolectadas aquel día; calculó las que le faltaba recoger; pensó en las probabilidades de buenos precios. Luego pensó en Jacobo." (p. 142)

Del Salto is, after all, a businessman; and he returns to what is dearest to him: to his son, who is pursuing his studies in Spain and is idealizing Puerto Rico from afar. Nothing is done, it is all talk, a privatistic attitude turns out to be finally the only solace. In that same discussion, when the Grito de Lares gets mentioned, that brief, heroic rebellion of September 1868, which remains one of the icons of Puerto Rican nationalism, for once the term "nación" is used; before and after we read *colonia*. It seems evident that the text transcends a mere analysis of *jíbaro* society; it should be read, message-directed as it is, as a negative cultural discourse offering all the same a definition of what Puerto Rico as a whole at that

point in its history represented. It is, *ex negativo*, not a founding myth – what kind of new nation would we have to assume? –, but a highly pessimistic diagnosis of things archaic as they are, or seem to be. We are far away from Manuel A. Alonso's happy *costumbrista* *Jíbaro* of 1849, with which, in conjunction with the *Agüinaldo Puertorriqueño* (1843) literary historians have let Puerto Rican literature traditionally begin.

Silvina, the young, innocent victim in *La charca*, may well be the incarnation of Puerto Rico. She is, enshrined in a kind of frame, beginning the novel and ending it; her evolution, if the term is appropriate, is that of the Puerto Rican nation as exemplified in the jíbaro community. The two quotes following should also illumine the beauty of Zeno Gandía's rhetoric and, albeit briefly, the symbolism of micro-geography and of nature put to use in this novel. Silvina, who is seventeen at her death, is placed at the cliff, above the river, looking downward:

"En el borde del barranco, asida a dos árboles para no caer, Silvina se inclinaba sobre la vertiente y miraba con impaciencia allá abajo, al cauce del río, gritando con todas sus fuerzas. Leandra! ... Leandra!" (p. 1)

At the end, after a harrowing story of poverty, exploitation and abuse, she tumbles in an epileptic fit down that *barranco* looking upwards towards a "fringe of light", turns into a bloody mass next to her mother, and falls with part of her body into the river:

"Allí la víctima, la resultante, el sedimento depositado en bajo fondo social, la maternidad sin alma, la pecadora sin pecado, la culpable sin culpa, la criminal inconsciente, la que, habiendo recibido al nacer el abyecto empujón, había también empujado a los seres que de ella nacieron. [...] En el misterio de la noche, Dios sollozaba. [...] Sólo el río murmurando en aquella soledad de muerte, siempre movedizo, siempre inquieto, siempre sonante, como si arrastrara en su corriente el prolongado lamento de un dolor sin bálsamo, como si llevara disuelto en su linfa el llanto de una desdicha que nadie enjuga, que nadie consuela, ¡que nadie conoce!" (p. 163)

I would not have chosen Zeno Gandía's *La charca* had its ideological trajectory remained an isolated case in Puerto Rican letters. It should be borne in mind that the *jíbaro* has, on the one hand, well into the late nineteen fifties served as a most welcome element, especially to hispanophile, conservative intellectual circles, for the definition of the Puerto Rican national character. It should also be borne in mind that the *jíbaro* as a racial type, is, as a rule, not a mulatto nor an African; he was, as a rule, considered white (whatever that may mean). And I would like to recall, not without some irony, that even in chapter 3 of *La charca* the

lethargy, the sickliness, the paleness, the lack of civilized organization of the "jíbaros" were, in the words of Juan del Salto who tries to contradict Padre Esteban's argument that they have not yet developed "un alma", a result of miscegenation:

"¡Cuánta mezcla! ¡Qué variedad de círculos tangentes! [...] La raza aborígen fue débil ante el choque, y sucumbió... Su prole, el tipo hijo de la mezcla, fue engendrado en la desgracia, en el recelo, bajo la sugestión del miedo, en el amplio tálamo de los bosques [...]" (pp. 35 f.)

In 1903, Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón had stated, "Hoy Puerto Rico sólo es una muchedumbre. Pero cuando la muchedumbre puertorriqueña tenga un alma, entonces Puerto Rico ser una patria." (Pedreira, p. 145) The *postmodernista* magazine *Indice* asked in 1929 leading intellectuals to answer the nagging question: "¿Somos, o no somos? ¿Qué somos y cómo somos?" Zeno Gandía's answer sounds particularly disillusioned: "La definición de Puerto Rico a mi juicio, es ésta: una nación en rehenes." And: "Fuimos mejores que somos [...]" Generaciones de juventud dispuesta y arrogante aparecen entregadas al culto del Dios Placer: de un placer de plasmación materialista e infecunda." (*Indice*, pp. 58 f.) Antonio S. Pedreira (1899-1939), an important Hispanist and bibliographer, whose stance is severely criticized by intellectuals like Marxist Juan Flores, felt that his answer in *Indice* deserved an amplification in book form, and thus with *Insularismo* (1934) a highly influential book saw the light. Pedreira's hispanophile conservatism, in contrast to Tomás Blanco's *Prontuario Histórico de Puerto Rico* (1935) denigrated the African and the mulatto elements to the benefit of the white *jíbaro*, whom he idealized and elevated to the incarnation of Puerto Ricanness: "El jíbaro – raíz central de nuestra cultura" (p.132). In his 1935 essay "La actualidad del jíbaro" he writes of "la bella calidad representativa" of the archetype. (In: Laguerre y Melón, p. 8.) Pedreira can be considered an important figure of creole "blanqueamiento" of Puerto Rico. (See González; Díaz Quiñones.)

Puerto Rican docility, another myth perpetrated by Pedreira, is, in addition to the loss of the agrarian world taken up by René Marqués, who dominated Puerto Rican letters throughout the fifties and remained influential until his death in 1979, in his furious reply to Kazin, in his dramas, novels and essays. He writes less of the humble *jíbaro*, he sees rather the possession and the laboring of the land as essential for Puerto Rican identity and nationality. Marqués in turn idealizes the *hacendados*; Mariana Bracetti de Rojas in his historical drama *Mariana o el Alba*, which takes up the Grito de Lares, warns before getting executed:

"'El trabajo en la hacienda no debe interrumpirse. La tierra ha de labrarse y hacerse producir siempre [...] La tierra es el

único patrimonio de los puertorriqueños. Deberá ser nuestra siempre. Siempre!” (Marqués, 1968, pp. 206 f.)

And in *Los soles truncos*, one of his most successful dramas, Inés realizes the reason for the loss of the hacienda of Toa Alta: “Tierras que no se trabajan, siempre ser n de los b rbaros” (*ibid.*). The barbarians, also in the Greek sense, are of course the North Americans.

The topic of the loss of an agrarian world, in particular of the sugar cane plantations, was a vital one, also after René Marqués. We have it – in the guise of parody – in Rosario Ferré’s novel *Maldito Amor* (1986), which I have had the pleasure of translating into German, and in Ana Lydia Vega’s *Falsas crónicas del sur* (1991), for instance.

All these works are part of a negative cultural discourse beginning with Zeno Gandía’s *La charca* and his “Crónicas de un mundo enfermo.” The representational character of the “novela de la tierra”, its lament of things vanishing, vanished, or not being in good shape rather than their celebration, is nonetheless a relevant constituent of Puerto Rican literary, intellectual and emotional realities. That this tradition is central to the Puerto experience seems evident. That it is, at least since the sixties, with ensuing galloping urbanization and suburbanization and pseudo-industrialization falling increasingly into the hands of eminent historians and sociologists like Fernando Picó, who bring to light facts and interpretations differing from fictional texts, should not be that surprising. There remains no doubt that this, too, is fascinating.

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